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ABSTRACT

Television is a large part of growing up in America, and a part that meshes in various ways with other influences. Teachers should understand it, and as the occasion requires, confront, correct, or take advantage of it. Research on television viewing yields five lessons. Television experience is an individual one, although there are definite patterns related to sex, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Viewing often serves quite specific needs, including information and escapism. The role of television and other mass media changes as children grow. There is evidence that television can influence behavior; and television's influence is at least partly contingent on other communication reaching the young viewer. The weight of evidence is that television is one of many factors that influence the child, and a teacher cannot ignore it. Needed now is research concerning the ways in which teachers might intervene more effectively in the communication between the child and the medium to turn its teachings to constructive ends. (WBC)

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TELEVISION AND THE TEACHER

George Comstock
The Rand Corporation

The classroom teacher is in stiff competition with one of the most common items of furniture in the American home--the television set. By the time the child reaches kindergarten or the first grade, he or she typically has watched hundreds of hours of television. From that first day of school onward, there is never a time when the pupil will not have spent more time in the company of television than in a classroom. Yet, teachers often give little attention to the mass media.

There are many reasons for this seeming paradox. With a few exceptions, the training that teachers receive ignores the influence of television on the child. It is only in recent years that the study of child development has begun to give attention to television as a factor--for better or worse--in the socialization of the child. The curricular demands of the school system impose on teachers a burden that is large and heavy enough that there is often little time for something that is foreign and in many ways apparently at odds with what the school is attempting to accomplish. Perhaps most important, the very kind of people who choose education as a career are very likely to be oriented toward the print and book culture to which television, in most of its guises, would appear to be antithetical. Given these circumstances, it would be surprising if they did not ignore it when they could.

Although understandable, this situation is unfortunate. There has accumulated since television first became common in American homes enough knowledge to tell us that television deserves the attention of the teacher. The medium is not an evil, although like any institution in some instances it may be villainous. It is certainly a large part of growing up in America, and one which teachers should understand, and as the occasion requires, confront, correct, or take advantage of.

THE SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE

The scientific literature dealing with television's influence on behavior now includes almost 2,500 items—experiments, surveys, case studies, and theoretical reviews and analyses. At least 45 percent of these are directly concerned with children and adolescents.

They make it clear that what the teacher does in the classroom, and the parent in the home, are part of a larger body of influences among which television is not unimportant. The strident critics who believe that the medium rides roughshod over every other influence to a detrimental end are wrong. Television is a part of the life of the young that meshes in various ways with other influences. The simplistic notion of television as a powerful bad influence is far less interesting than the more complex facts social and behavioral science has to offer.

The major early evaluations of the influence of television on the young, involving thousands of children and adolescents, were performed in the late 1950s by Wilbur Schramm and his colleagues in the United States and by Hilde Himmelweit and her colleagues in England. Their findings still have relevance today, and have been enlarged upon by the work of dozens of social and behavioral scientists in diverse disciplines in the years since. In 1963, a major step occurred with the first publication by Albert Bandura, a Stanford psychologist, and by Leonard Berkowitz, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin, of separate experiments demonstrating that the viewing of violent portrayals by children and adolescents increased the likelihood of aggressive behavior immediately subsequent to viewing. These experiments initiated a series of studies now numbering perhaps over 100 by these two pioneers and their colleagues and students of the circumstances in which television may directly influence behavior.

PATTERNS AND INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

The first lesson of this research is that the television experience is an individual one, although there are definite patterns related to sex, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Almost all children view some television fairly regularly. Girls tend to view somewhat more than

boys. Children from families of lower socioeconomic status tend to be heavier viewers. Black children view more than whites, even when socioeconomic status is taken into account. The typical child begins viewing three or four years before entering school. Tastes begin to form immediately. Boys and girls differ in their viewing preferences, with boys shifting toward action-adventure and girls toward situation comedy after an early common interest in cartoons. Perhaps more important, by the time the children are in the later years of elementary school there are great differences in individual preference. This has had a very large consequence for our understanding of the influence of television, because it has made it possible to compare children who watch quite different diets of television. Amount of viewing also varies markedly. For example, when Jack Lyle, who was associated with the original Schramm evaluation, undertook to study some of the same issues again a decade later he found in large samples of sixth and 10th graders that fully 10 percent did not view at all on a typical school day, while 25 percent viewed the extraordinary amount of five-to-six hours. However, he also found that over the decade the average amount of viewing had increased considerably.

The sheer quantity of time consumed by television by itself must be considered a major effect. When John Robinson of Cleveland State University analyzed the data from a gigantic study of industrialized countries sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), he found that television has increased markedly the amount of time adults spend with the mass media. The same certainly holds for children. One effect of television on children, then, is to take time away from other activities and to reduce the time that adults in a family might spend with children in non-media-centered interaction.

FANTASY AND INFORMATION

The second lesson is that television often serves quite specific needs. The early study of Schramm and colleagues concluded, for example, that troubled and disturbed children often were especially high consumers of television because of the escapism provided by the medium's fantasy.

They proposed that television often could be better understood in terms of what the child brings to television rather than what television does to the child. The point was not that television has no effects, but that effects are often contingent on characteristics of the young viewer. This notion has received strong support through the years. Children, like adults, typically turn to television for entertainment and distraction. Lyle, for example, found that children are more likely to turn to music when disturbed or troubled. Relief from unusual personal anxiety is apparently better delivered by media other than television. Fantasy and amusement, however, are television's *forte*, and television historically has tended to replace use by children of other fantasy media, such as comic books.

Beyond this, however, television will be used for information not otherwise available. Lyle found that young children frequently model their play after something they have seen on television. Children prefer programs with characters their own age or otherwise like them, which presumably augments such pertinence to their lives. Black and white children have different viewing preferences. As would be expected, blacks have a greater liking for programs with black characters. More interesting, and not so expected, black children have a greater liking for single parent family programs, and black adolescents more often report using television to get ideas about dating and acceptable social behavior. The implication is that television brings these children information relevant to their lives, where broken homes are more common and models for the normative behavior of the society at large not so common. It would be unreasonable not to expect that television performs the same service for children and adolescents generally when their environment is somehow lacking. This view is supported by the finding of two Washington State University sociologists, Melvin and Lois De Fleur, that when real-life examples are absent children's conceptions of occupations conform to their portrayal on television. It is further supported, although the study in this instance dealt with adults, by the finding by George Gerbner and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications, who issue the annual reports on the various trends in violence in television

drama, that heavy television viewers are more likely to believe the real world matches the way the world is portrayed on television in regard to things with which they are personally unfamiliar, such as the likelihood of falling victim to violent crime. These varied findings have led some researchers to use the phrase "third parent" to describe the relationship between the young and television.

DEVELOPMENTAL CHANGES

A third lesson is that the role of television and other mass media changes with growing up. Amount of viewing increases through the elementary school years, then decreases through the high school and college years as dating, other social activities, education, and employment increasingly consume time. Very young children are often unable to tie together the complexities of plot and theme; incidents are likely to be comprehended in isolation and thus, from the point of view of the writer and producer, misunderstood. Young children typically do not understand that commercials are different from entertainment in being self-interested, calculated attempts to sell products. By the second grade, children have begun to distrust commercials. Yet, they do not become immune to them. When John Rossiter and Thomas Robertson of the Wharton School (University of Pennsylvania) studied the toy preferences of almost 300 first-, third-, and fifth-grade children over the five weeks of saturated toy advertising before Christmas they found that children initially resistant to the appeals succumbed to preferring television-advertised toys by the end of the sales campaign.

The careful sorting out of television's changing role as the child matures is just beginning. However, there is some evidence to support the reasonable supposition that its influence decreases as the child grows older and his beliefs and attitudes become more firmly rooted and his personal experience wider. Thus, one study found that a decrease in the belief in personal effectiveness in regard to politics between the 1972 election and the dismal Watergate revelations was greatest among young children. Such data bear directly on television, because it is a

major source of information on public events for the young. Howard Tolley, Jr., of Wilberforce University, for example, surveyed several thousand children 7 to 15 years old and found not only that these young persons believed that television was a much more important source of information on the Viet Nam War than teachers or parents but that regular news viewers were indeed better informed. Because television is by such a great margin the medium of the young, it is not hyperbole to think of each generation as a new "television generation."

BEHAVIORAL INFLUENCE

No subject has drawn more attention from social and behavioral scientists, the public and the government than the influence of television on aggressiveness. The voluminous research provides a fourth lesson, that television can influence behavior.

Since the early 1950s, television violence has been the subject of no less than seven congressional hearings. In addition, there was a lengthy staff report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence in 1969, and the Surgeon General's extensive examination which, in 1972, led to the publication of five volumes covering $1 million in new empirical research and the interpretative report of a specially-assembled advisory committee. The Surgeon General's studies added important new findings to an already sizable body of evidence.

The conclusion which best fits the social and behavioral science findings is that the viewing of television violence increases the likelihood of subsequent aggressiveness. There is very little evidence to support the notion of a reduction in aggressiveness as the result of a cathartic release of hostility as the result of vicarious participation in violence by exposure to it in the mass media, although such exposure may reduce aggressiveness when it is distasteful enough to arouse anxiety over aggression that leads to its inhibition. Catharsis of this sort probably occurs for a few individuals, but it is not typical.

Three kinds of evidence converge toward the conclusion of a causal relationship between violence viewing and aggressiveness:

- Numerous experiments which demonstrate that the observation by young children of a television portrayal may lead to imitation of that portrayal.
- Numerous experiments which demonstrate that the observation by adolescents of a television portrayal of interpersonal violence may increase their level of non-imitative aggressiveness towards others.
- Various surveys which find a positive correlation among young persons between aggressiveness and the amount of violent television viewed.

It is worth examining one of the imitation experiments in detail. This particular experiment was conducted by Bandura and his colleagues. The subjects are nursery school children divided into four groups. One group sees a live adult attack a Bobo doll in a number of *specific ways*--with fists, by kicking, with a mallet, by throwing rubber balls, and by verbal abuse. The second group sees the *same* attack by a human being occur in a televised portrayal. The third group sees the *same* attack occur in a televised portrayal, but this time the attacker is a costumed "cat lady" such as might appear in a cartoon. The fourth group sees no attacks of any kind. Afterwards, each child is taken to a playroom where there is a Bobo doll and the other paraphernalia available to the attacker. The child's behavior is surreptitiously observed. The children who saw the attacks--live human, televised human, or cartoon-like--performed many more acts resembling those of the attacker than those not exposed to the attacks. In addition, the children who saw the cartoon-like portrayal performed more behavior like that in the portrayal than those who saw no attacks.

Three hypotheses are supported. First, the observation of a televised portrayal can result in the imitative display by young children of what has been portrayed. Presumably, the children who saw the televised

attacks acquired responses previously novel to them. Second, the effects of televised and real-life experience can be similar. This is indicated by the fact that both the attacks by the live human and by the televised human resulted in increased imitative aggression. Third, cartoon-like portrayals can have an influence similar to that of portrayals involving humans. This suggests that whatever we may infer about the influence of television on children, cartoons cannot be considered exempt.

The way other questions have been explored is illustrated by another Bandura experiment. The subjects again are nursery school children. This time they are divided into three groups. One sees a televised sequence in which an adult attacks a Bobo doll in the same specific ways as before--with fists, by kicking, with a mallet, by throwing rubber balls, and by verbal abuse. At the end, another adult rewards the attacker by serving candy and soda. The second sees an identical televised sequence except that instead of a reward the second adult punishes the attacker by tripping and spanking him. The third sees the same sequence, except that there is neither reward nor punishment. Again, after seeing one of the portrayals, each child is taken to a playroom with a Bobo doll and the other paraphernalia and his behavior is surreptitiously observed. The groups that saw the attacker punished engaged in far fewer aggressive acts like those of the attacker in the televised portrayal than the groups that saw the very same aggressive behavior but also saw the attacker either rewarded or not punished. However, when the children were offered a small reward for performing the acts they had seen, the differences disappeared.

Two hypotheses are supported. First, the way that an aggressive act is portrayed on television can affect its influence on children's subsequent imitation. In this instance, reward for portrayed aggression was shown to increase the likelihood of imitation. Second, even when there is no performance of portrayed behavior, such behavior may have been added to the repertoire of the young viewer. The implication is that to some degree such acquired behavior may be mentally stored for use at a later time.

The experiments in which the subjects have been adolescents differ by focusing on the encouragement of aggression different in kind from that depicted in the television portrayal. An example is an experiment by Berkowitz and colleagues. The subjects are college males and females. In order to insure the presence of a minimal degree of aggressive drive, they are first angered by receiving electric shocks administered by a confederate of the experimenter as feedback in an experimental puzzle-solving task. Then, they see a film portrayal of a very violent boxing match from the film *Champion* under a variety of circumstances. Or, they see a nonviolent film.

Later, the puzzle-solving task is repeated, but this time the subjects have the opportunity to deliver electric shocks to the confederate. In one of the circumstances for viewing the violent film, the subjects are told the name of the experimenter's confederate is "Kirk," the same as the victim in the fight film. In the other circumstances for viewing the violent film, the events behind the portrayed fight are depicted either as making the beating justified or unjustified. The adolescents who saw the fight film delivered a higher level of shocks than those who saw the nonviolent film. The adolescents who believed the confederate had the same name as the film victim delivered a higher level of shocks than those who believed the names were not the same. The adolescents for whom the film beating was depicted as justified delivered a higher level of shocks than those for whom it was depicted as unjustified.

Three hypotheses are supported. First, the televised portrayal of aggression can result in increased aggression by adolescents against another person and that aggression so affected can be different in kind from what was observed. Second, similarity between the elements of the portrayal and the real-life situation can stimulate such effects. In this case, it was the overlap of names. Third, the likelihood of such effects are enhanced by the portrayal of violence as justified.

More than 50 such experiments on imitative and non-imitative aggression subsequent to exposure to television violence existed prior to the Surgeon General's study. Others have been conducted since. To summarize,

they indicate that such aggression was enhanced by television portrayals in which there was reward or no punishment for aggression, aggression was depicted as justified, elements in the portrayal match those in real life, the perpetrator of violence is depicted as similar to the viewer, violence is depicted as truly aggressive and motivated by an intent to injure, and the violence is presented as real rather than clearly fictional or fantasy.

Experiments, especially laboratory-type experiments where scientific control is rigorous but the price of that control is some degree of artificiality and a departure from normal, everyday circumstances, have weaknesses as well as strengths. A principal strength is that they permit causal inferences because of their design controls for factors other than the hypothesized "cause" under scrutiny. A weakness is that their artificiality inevitably leaves some doubt about generalizing from the results to real life.

Most of the experiments on television violence have been of the laboratory-type. Although a strong argument can be made that the propositions which they support lead to the inference that television violence increases the likelihood of aggression, it was skepticism over their generalizability that led to the Surgeon General's study. What the Surgeon General's study added was the demonstration of a correlation in real life between violence viewing and aggressiveness. This correlation, present in several samples, withstood the controlling of such variables as socioeconomic status, sex, age, and school achievement. Moreover, the pattern of the data indicated that the correlation was *not* explained by the preference of already more aggressive youngsters for violent television. Another finding from these new surveys, and supported also by the early studies of Schramm and colleagues, is that quantity of television viewing is *not* related to greater aggressiveness. It is only when the amount of violent programming viewed is carefully singled out that a relationship with aggressiveness appears.

Thus, the case against television violence rests on the convergence of different kinds of evidence. The experiments demonstrate a causal relationship, but do not insure its presence in the more complex circumstances of everyday life. The surveys, although not strong by themselves

for causal inference because of the many uncontrolled factors, indicate the presence of a real-life relationship not demonstrably attributable to factors other than television. The convergence is further supported by a very few experiments in real-life settings where the criticisms of artificiality apply less strongly or not at all.

There are, of course, some important caveats. One is that the conclusion rests on the consistency across studies and not on a truly convincing single demonstration. Another is that the research tells us little about other functions or purposes television violence may serve for the young. There is no reason to think that the various heroics, courage, independence, inventiveness, persistence, and setting right of wrongs by television protagonists are entirely negative in their influence. A third is that in some studies aggressive effects have been confined to those children typically although not abnormally more aggressive. This emphasizes the importance of individual characteristics of the child in any effect of television. A fourth is that we know very little about the actual degree of social harm or criminal violence that may be attributable to the apparent relationship between violence viewing and aggression. It may be negligible or it may be large.

This is the scientific background to the adoption by the television industry, under pressure from the Congress and the Federal Communications Commission, of the controversial "family viewing" code in 1975 under which violence and sex-oriented content is restricted during two hours of prime-time. The eventual effect of such violence-reducing measures remains to be seen. It apparently has reduced violence during the affected hours, but whether it may increase the proscribed content during later hours, when many young persons are still viewing, by implicitly defining them as for "adult viewing" remains to be seen. It will probably not affect the rare circumstance in which especially provocative portrayals do lead to antisocial behavior, such as the tendency for airline bomb threats to follow broadcasts of the Rod Serling play, *Doomsday Flight*. If such singular productions rather than the general level of violence are the problem, the kind of reform represented by "family viewing" may be more palliative than cure. There are also several studies which indicate that merely

arousing but not necessarily violent portrayals will increase the likelihood of whatever behavior is appropriate to the real-world environment. Such findings do not vindicate television violence, which is inherently arousing, and it is probable that violence influences behavior over-and-above its ability to physiologically excite young viewers, but they do raise questions about the efficacy of violence reduction. It is possible that we have a problem without a ready solution.

The larger import of the violence studies is that television can influence behavior. There is currently pioneering research concerned with the impact of portrayals on socially desirable behavior, including the reduction of debilitating phobias through exposure to portrayals of persons behaving with ease in the presence of the feared object and the encouragement of helping, cooperation, and other constructive acts by exposure to portrayals of persons engaging in such behavior. The evidence on aggression should be taken as an example, not a delineation of the reach of television's influence.

IMPORTANCE OF OTHER COMMUNICATIONS

The fifth lesson of the research is that television's influence is at least partly contingent on other communication reaching the young viewer. The evidence is that, by and large, parents do not widely attempt to monitor their children's viewing. The task of limiting hours or prohibiting certain kinds of content may be too arduous for many parents, but the evidence is clear that when parents express their views on topics with which television deals they can have a very powerful influence. Thus, Bradley Greenberg of Michigan State University found that parental emphasis on the use of aggression to solve problems had more influence than television violence on attitudes favorable to the use of aggression, and Steven Chaffee and Jack McLeod of the University of Wisconsin found that when parents had such attitudes the correlation between violence viewing and aggression was severely reduced. Tolley, in his study of television and Viet Nam, found that although television was the primary source of factual information the interpretation of the facts and the attitudes of children toward the war followed those of

parents when parents made their views known. And in a very provocative experiment, a team of psychologists found that censurious remarks about the characters in a violent portrayal reduced the subsequent administration of electric shocks to an unseen victim by college-age subjects. Television should certainly be counted as a potential influence on the young viewer, but not one too powerful to be corrected or mitigated.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHER

The implications of these two-and-a-half decades of research for the classroom are large. There are certainly many, many questions left unanswered. In the coming years, we can expect much more effort to identify the role of television in the development of the child. The degree of its contribution to the cognitive and affective growth of the child is largely unknown. There will be much more research on how it interacts with such important traditional socializing agents as the parent and the school. There is also growing concern over the possibly detrimental effects on children of television advertising, ranging from the alleged impropriety of selling to children before they are well-prepared to comprehend the nature of advertising to possibly detrimental effects on nutritional habits, over-the-counter drug use, and play with harmful household products. The presumptive evidence, because of the increasing viewing during these years, is that it is particularly important during elementary school although it would be an error to dismiss any influence in later years. The weight of the evidence is that television is one of the many factors that influence the child. The variety of entertainment content that bears on aspects of life with which the growing child must come to terms is immense, including the behavior of police, the degree of violence in society, the means used to achieve goals, family life, behavior between the sexes, and roles for women; the humor of Mary Hartman's comment in the opening episode of the 1976-77 season that television relieves her of teaching her child about sex derived from its degree of truth, not its exaggeration. It is something that a teacher cannot really ignore if he or she is to adequately deal with the child that arrives in the classroom. Television may or may not

be a "third parent," but it can be thought of as a "second teacher." One of the principal needs for new research is the various ways in which teachers might intervene more effectively in the communication between the child and the medium to turn its teachings to constructive ends. The evidence in behalf of the power of parents and others to modify its impact is in fact evidence that there is much for the teacher to do. To turn the dictum of Schramm and colleagues around, a good way of thinking about the influence of television is in terms of what the classroom--in conjunction with parents and others--can bring to the child about the medium.

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